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Joe Strummer

The Clash's gifted and politically committed singer, he moved on from punk to embrace global tastes in music

Adam Sweeting
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The Guardian

It was the singer Joe Strummer's ranting, demented performances with the Clash in the mid-1970s that made him punk's most passionate and convincing frontman. Strummer, who has died of an apparent heart attack aged 50, relished bruising physical contact with his audience, while his lyrics articulated a shared sense of confusion, frustration and thwarted ambition.

The Clash were pitched into the frontline of punk in December 1976, when they joined the Sex Pistols on their controversial - and mostly cancelled - Anarchy In The UK tour, and early the following year they signed with CBS Records. Their debut album, The Clash, was a barrage of provocative sloganeering and social agitation, from White Riot to the crude reggae of Police And Thieves, but they couldn't quite conceal their knack for fiendishly catchy choruses.

While the Sex Pistols imploded and punk rock degenerated into farce, the Clash began to demonstrate hidden depths. Their second album, Give 'Em Enough Rope, veered dangerously close to American hard rock, and their next, London Calling, was a tour de force of styles, from rockabilly to hard rock, dub and ska, alchemised by plenty of finger-jabbing attitude; in 1989, it topped Rolling Stone magazine's top 100 albums of the 1980s.

The triple album, Sandinista! - the band waived some of their royalties to keep the retail price low - caught them experimenting with rap, funk, ambient music and folk. Their ability to cross racial and musical boundaries without sounding patronising or pretentious was one of their most precious attributes.

With 1982's Combat Rock, the Clash looked like becoming the next Rolling Stones, reaping huge sales and critical adulation in the United States, and appearing at the giant US '83 festival in California. But the band was never designed for the shopping malls and suburbs of heartland America, and though Strummer tried to keep them alive,

the Clash fizzled out after a depressing string of musical and personnel changes.

Strummer himself was born John Mellor, in the Turkish capital Ankara, the son of Ronald Mellor, a second secretary in the British diplomatic service. He was reluctant to talk about his background and boarding-school education at the City of London Freemen's school in Surrey, scarcely the most plausible credentials for a punk rocker.

However, school holidays gave him the opportunity to visit his parents in such exotic postings as Cypus, Cairo, Mexico and Tehran. This exposed him to cultures and musical styles which would emerge in the Clash, and in his solo work. He displayed considerable artistic talent, and went on to study at the Central School of Art and Design, in London, and Newport College of Art, in Wales.

But music was his primary obsession, and, after a shambolic stint with his first band, the Vultures, by 1974 he was beginning to create ripples across west London with his raucous R&B unit, the 101ers. Having spent a brief period under the name of Woody Mellor, in honour of Woody Guthrie, he now became Joe Strummer. The Clash was born when Mick Jones and Paul Simonon, guitarist and bassist with the London SS, poached Strummer from the 101ers, with London SS man ager Bernard Rhodes stepping in to manage the new group. Strummer's last appearance with the band was in 1985.

He branched out as a movie actor in, among other films, Alex Cox's Straight To Hell (1987) and Walker (1987), and Jim Jarmusch's Mystery Train (1989). He also worked on the soundtracks for Walker, Permanent Record (1988) and, more recently, Grosse Point Blank (1997). He released his first solo album, Earthquake Weather, in 1989, and, two years later, stood in temporarily as lead singer with the Pogues.

He re-emerged with the Mescaleros in 1999; their two albums, Rock Art & The X-Ray Style and last year's Global A G-Go, were hectic but convincing realisations of Strummer's global tastes, leaping stylistically from the Caribbean to Africa and the Balkans.

Two years ago, Strummer received Q magazine's inspiration award, and last year the Clash's outstanding contribution to British music was honoured with an Ivor Novello award. It was the first time since 1982 that the best-known line-up of Strummer, Jones, Simonon and drummer Topper Headon had been reunited on stage, but Strummer had no interest in repeating his past. He and the Clash steadfastly refused a stream of enormous cash offers to reunite, a stance which has made their career seem all the more impressive in hindsight.

Recently, Strummer had been enjoying a fresh surge of creativity. Last month, he completed a British tour with the Mescaleros, and he was working with Bono and Dave Stewart on a track for Nelson Mandela's Aids Awareness in Africa. Last month, he played a firefighters' union benefit at Acton town hall, in west London - the kind of politically

charged gesture that the Clash would have relished. He was joined onstage by Mick Jones, whom he had sacked in 1983. A well-known face around his home near Bridgwater, in Somerset, he played a benefit concert for the town's Engine Room filmmakers' project only three weeks ago.

"I don't want to look back," Strummer told the Liverpool Echo last month. "I want to keep going forward, I still have something to say to people." He is survived by his wife Lucinda, their two daughters and a stepdaughter.

▪ Joe Strummer (John Graham Mellor), musician, born August 21 1952; died December 22 2002

Jim Paton writes:
For three years in the mid-1970s - before the Clash, before punk, before fame - Joe Strummer and the 101ers were the band who did, in west London at least, every squatters' benefit. And they did them all for nothing.

But then Joe was a squatter himself, first of all in Hammersmith, then in Walterton Road, the next street down from Elgin Avenue, which was the focus of the lively squatting culture of that time in Maida Hill. In Hammersmith, Joe also produced squatting cartoons; the drawing was not good, the ideas were.

Incredibly popular, the 101ers were a really good band, musicians who were always up for it, whether it was a winter benefit, or a summer street festival.

Strummer himself did not take injustice lying down, and, around both the London Squatters Union and the Advisory Service For Squatters (Ass), we could always rely on him for money. Once in those days, at what was then the South London Polytechnic, at the Elephant and Castle, the 101ers played a benefit gig for Ass with Carol Grimes. It made the then fabulous sum of £1,000, enough to keep the organisation going for a couple of years.

So when the 101ers split, it did seem to be the end of that era; indeed, at first, I had little time for the Clash. But Joe never completely went away. He was back for the 10th anniversary of that summer 1975 eviction of Elgin Avenue.

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